

Conscience Without Sunset

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By Edward S. Little II

Four years ago I wrote an article, "Living With Tares," responding to an editorial in the evangelical magazine *Christianity Today* that had described schism as sometimes necessary and offered the Episcopal Church as its primary cautionary tale. I argued that I remain in the Episcopal Church because biblical faithfulness requires me to do so; because Jesus is Lord of the Church, and it's up to him—and not us—to sort things out in the end.

In light of the actions of the 76th General Convention, I find myself revisiting that article and asking the question again: Why *do* I stay? Does our Lord have a continuing purpose for people like me, a bridge-building conservative and evangelical Catholic, in the Episcopal Church? If so, what is it? And what are the conditions required for continuing and faithful engagement with the church?

I ask these questions with a heavy heart. The bonds of affection in this church are deep. I minister, and gratefully so, to gay and lesbian parishioners all around my diocese. Many of my most beloved friends are colleague bishops who vote on the opposite side of the issues that divide us. I see Jesus in them, and I pray they see him in me. They are brothers and sisters in Christ.

Yet reality forces hard questions. General Convention took definitive action. Resolutions D025 and C056 answered two questions with clarity. The first has to do with human sexuality. "[S]ame-sex couples living in lifelong committed relationships ... have responded to God's call and have exercised various ministries in and on behalf of God's One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. ... God has called and may call such individuals to any ordained ministry in the Episcopal Church" (D025). "[T]he Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music ... [shall] collect and develop theological and liturgical resources"; and, in the meantime, "bishops, particularly those in dioceses within civil jurisdictions where same-gender marriage, civil unions, or domestic partnerships are legal, may provide generous pastoral response to meet the needs of members of this Church" (C056).

We have made our decision. The restraint called for in B033 of the 75th General Convention has been set aside. Bishops may authorize blessings (that's the clear implication of the "generous pastoral response"), and liturgies are on their way. Our course has been inexorably determined. The conversation about human sexuality is effectively over.

We answered a second question at General Convention as well: The question of the Anglican Communion, and its life and ministry. The Windsor Report presents a nuanced and balanced picture of the Church, a Catholic vision of interdependent life, carefully weighing the need for autonomy on one side of the scale and the need for accountability on the other. Our actions put us clearly on the autonomy side of the spectrum. In approving Resolutions D025 and C056, we have said No to the Anglican Communion. We have rejected two of the three moratoria requested by the Windsor Report and the four Instruments of Communion (most recently, at its May meeting, by the Anglican Consultative Council), and ignored the plea of the Archbishop of Canterbury in his General Convention sermon that we do nothing to exacerbate our divisions. The trajectory of the Episcopal Church propels

us to the fringe of the Anglican Communion. Again, the conversation about ecclesiology is effectively over.

During General Convention a host of colleagues assured me of their love and friendship and their appreciation of conservative voices like mine. For that I am profoundly grateful; their expressions were heartfelt and deeply moving. But given the margins by which D025 and C056 were approved, it's clear the traditional perspective is a dwindling minority in the church. There aren't many of us left. What do people like me need from the church? We need the ability to live and to act according to our convictions, and to be assured that we have a *permanent* place in the church. This may seem like a simple and obvious matter, but it isn't.

The final resolve of D025 recognizes that “members of the Episcopal Church ... are not of one mind, and Christians of good conscience disagree about some of these matters.” True enough. But our recent history demonstrates that people in the position of a theological minority may ultimately find their position canonically outlawed. That was certainly the experience of those who cannot affirm the ordination of women to the priesthood and the episcopate.

In 1977, the year following canonical provision for the ordination of women, the House of Bishops — in its famous statement drawn up at Port St. Lucie, Fla.—said that “no Bishop, Priest, Deacon or Lay person should be coerced or penalized in any manner nor suffer any canonical disabilities as a result of his or her conscientious objection to or support of the 65th General Convention’s action with regard to the ordination of women to the priesthood or episcopate.” To be sure, these words emanated from one house alone, and thus do not carry the full weight of the church’s highest governing body; but nonetheless, Port St. Lucie is a classic restatement of the priority of conscience when Christians disagree on matters of deep conviction.

This provision for what our Lutheran friends call “bound conscience” was not to last, however. I was a member of the House of Deputies in 1997 when General Convention — by amending Canon III.8.1 — declared objection to the ordination of women canonically illegal. It is no longer possible, under the canons, to be ordained in the Episcopal Church if one cannot support women in all orders of ministry. Speech after speech supporting the change in 1997 ended with some variation of the claim that: “This is not a conscience issue. It’s a *justice* issue.”

Twelve years later, there are very few left in our church who do not affirm the ordination of women. As a strong supporter of the ordination of women to all orders, I grieve that there is no longer a place in the church for those who cannot conscientiously support this practice. Will the same fate befall those who oppose the theological, ethical, and ecclesiological decisions of the 76th General Convention? I fear that the answer is Yes. Not immediately; not, perhaps, in 2012 or 2015. But someday people like me will find ourselves on the margins, without the ability to test a vocation to ordained ministry, our position banned, theological uniformity imposed. The speeches of 1997 will find new expression.

Lord Carey of Clifton, the 103rd Archbishop of Canterbury, asked a difficult question in April at a conference sponsored by the Anglican Communion Institute: “Can conservative believers be assured that they have a future place in TEC without censure or opposition?” This question is both apt and pressing. We need a conscience clause with canonical and constitutional authority, a conscience clause that contains no sunset provision, that cannot be revoked. If the Episcopal Church is to be truly diverse — if conservative Christians are to find a place in our life in the next decade or the one following— then the 77th General Convention must turn its attention to the inclusion of theological minorities. Without that assurance, the unraveling of our church, already a tragic reality, will continue apace. The

inevitable pattern will re-emerge, as conservatives move from honored minority to tolerated dissidents to canonical outlaws. I (and others like me) will not be among those who leave; but we may well be among the last conservatives left. And so we must, I believe, bend heart, mind, and will to the protection and permanent place of traditional voices in our church.

The Rt. Rev. Edward S. Little II is the Bishop of Northern Indiana, and a member of the Communion Partners coalition.